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Elements of Fiction in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is an exemplary model of literary fiction. To be considered literary fiction, a work must possess specific elements and “[give] us a keener awareness if our humanity within a universe that is sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile” (Arp 63). Literary stories, long or short, can contain any or all of the following: symbols, three-dimensional characters facing conflicts, humor, irony, unhappy endings, complex plot structure, artistic unity, an overall theme, or allegory. The short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is a literary work that makes use of many different elements of fiction.

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” approaches the sensitive subject of teenage girls about to enter womanhood. Connie, the young protagonist, is not a main character one would expect to find in commercial fiction who is “a sympathetic hero or heroine” (Arp 65). On the contrary, Connie is a self-centered teen who treats everyone around her as inferior and only cares about her good looks. However, this characterization of Connie is realistic, and she represents many girls in society. As a whole, Connie’s situation with Arnold Friend, the rapist and murdered, demonstrates how an enormous amount of teenage girls are flaunting their looks to boys without any regard to the possible tragic consequences. In this way, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” provokes thoughts on real life situations. Hopefully, Connie’s story will make adolescents think about the way they act and treat those around them.

Artistic unity is present in all aspects of Oates’ short story. Details have been carefully incorporated to give “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” greater depth and meaning. For example, Connie’s outward negative relationship and actions with her mother and sister, June, provide suspense later in the story when Connie must decide between going with Arnold in order to save her family or save herself at the risk of her family. The random expressions on Arnold’s jalopy are an example of artistic unity. The numbers 33, 19, and 17 all add up to 69 and could also be a reference to the Bible or the ages of victims of an actual serial rapist and murdered (Hurley). The sayings on the car, such as “DONE BY CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER” (Oates), relate to Arnold’s disturbed and feminist personality. In addition, when eliminating the ‘r’s from Arnold Friend’s name, it spells out “an old fiend,” which is exactly what Arnold, a thirty-year-old man stalking to rape and murder a teenage girl, is portrayed to be (Easterly). The character of Ellie is also impertinent to the short story plot because he juxtaposes Arnold. Everything in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is essential to the theme and plot structure of the literary short story.

An additional aspect of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” that enhances its literary structure is the fact that it does not end happily, as most commercial fiction works do. Instead, Connie goes “out to a nice field, out in the country where it smells so nice and it’s sunny” with Arnold where she will no doubt be raped, murdered, and buried (Oates). The imagery used and description of what the field will be is yet another example of artistic unity. This unhappy ending provides an unfortunate reality that “[forces] us to ponder the complexities of life” (Arp 108).

The plot structure determines whether the story is literary or commercial. Plots have rising action and a climax followed by falling action (Arp 110). The rising action in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” includes the description of Connie, her attitude and actions towards her family, and her time spent at the mall and movies with her various friends. Her attitude is what ultimately leads her to being selected by Arnold as his victim, and his appearance at her house is the point at which the story becomes suspenseful. After showing up at Connie’s, Arnold’s and Connie’s action make up the falling action of the short story. All elements of the plot are structured to lead up to or lead from the ultimate climax.

Characterization is another important element of literary fiction. Connie is not an “attractive character” due to her selfishness and immaturity (Arp 162). However, Connie is portrayed through indirect presentation a round character (Arp 162-3). Being a round character, Connie is complex and has various personalities that are used in different situations. For example, the young girl is flirtatious and sweet around boys she thinks are cute, while at home she is hostile and unrelenting towards her mother and sister. Connie believes that she is much superior in looks and personality to her mother and sister, hence her unfriendly actions towards them. Throughout “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Connie changes, and in the end she sacrifices herself for her family; this is not an action to be expected from the initial portrayal of Connie given her feelings towards her mother and June.

Another significant element of fiction is theme, and one particular explanation describes it as “when an author has seriously attempted to record life accurately or to reveal some truth about it” (Arp 188-9). Oates touches on a very important theme in real life: the promiscuity of teenage girls potentially leading to dire consequences. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” fictionalizes actual actions of an actual rapist and murdered, Charles Schmid (Hurley). This short story raises awareness and thoughts addressing teens and the major societal issue of rape. Another quality of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” that strengthens its literary classification is that fact that it has multiple themes. One main idea is rape, but the short story also touches on trusting of strangers, femininity, valuing family, and falsified personalities in order to fit in with society.

An obvious literary trait in Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is the abundance of symbolism which “is something that means *more* than what it suggests on the surface” (Arp 276). The image created of Connie in her “shorts and flat ballerina slippers” symbolizes millions of girls today all wearing the same fashions and acting in the same manner in order to fit in (Oates). Connie, who is initially described as being selfish and heartless, is “bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy” which portrays her as innocent and angelic, which she is of the utmost quality upon the arrival of Arnold Friend (Oates). Her innocence is what allows Arnold to have such a powerful effect over Connie.

Music is a symbol of the utmost importance to the short story. In the beginning, the music playing at the drive-in restaurant calms and relaxes Connie and her friends. Later, the music from XYZ Sunday Jamboree is playing as Connie is relaxing on a Sunday afternoon. This same music is playing on Ellie’s radio when he and Arnold Friend arrive, creating a familiar, relaxing atmosphere despite the uncomfortable arrival of the rapist (Easterly). In addition, Arnold speaks with a “slight rhythmic lilt” that soothes and persuades. Arnold can be interpreted as a satyr, a creature who uses music to seduce women. He is described as having black, almost wig-like hair, wearing tight jeans, black boots, sunglasses, and heavy black boots (Oates). His thick black hair could be hiding pointed ears and horns, while his pants are hiding a tail. Inside Arnold’s boots are papers used to make him appear taller or to possibly hide hooves (Easterly). Arnold’s knowledge of the whereabouts of Connie’s family suggests a god-like similarity. A normal human being would not know such things as what Connie’s family is doing at the exact point in time that Arnold is attempting to coerce Connie. Interpreting Arnold as a satyr strengthens the idea of music seducing and calming Connie.

Arnold’s car is yet another symbol. The car is a jalopy, which is “an old, decrepit, or unpretentious automobile” (Dictionary.com). The rusty, old, ugly car gives Arnold a negative appearance – one that is unkempt or poor. In addition, the numbers and phrases on the car are symbolic as previously mentioned. The numbers 33, 19, and 17 add up to 69, a number often used as a sexual symbol (Easterly). Another likely symbol of the numbers can be found when counting backwards from the end of the Old Testament to the thirty-third chapter, Judge, chapter 19, verse 17 which includes the saying “where are you going, and where do you come from?” (Hurley). Another possibility of what the numbers symbolize it that when using a specific code, the number correlate to Genesis 19:17 which includes a warning to escape (Hurley). However, this symbol explanation makes little sense because Arnold would not warn Connie to escape from him. The three numbers could also symbolize the ages of the Charles Schmid’s victims (Hurley). All are possible explanations of the intended symbolism of the numbers.

The phrases on the car are also symbolic. The sayings are “MAN THE FLYING SAUCER,” “DONE BY CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER,” and “ARNOLD FRIEND.” All of these sayings together show Arnold’s random and crazed personality. However, looking at them as individual symbols brings about different meanings. “MAN THE FLYING SAUCER” could be unscrambled to say “HE SATAN LUCIFER” (Where are You Going, Where have You Been? – Literary Criticism). “DONE BY CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER” can signify a feminist or sexist attitude, as displayed by Arnold towards Connie. Arnold’s name, as mentioned before with the elimination of the “r”s can come to say “an old fiend,” which is exactly what Arnold is.

Overall, Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is an excellent example of literary fiction. Many elements of fiction are implemented including complex plot structure and characterization, causing reflection of real life, symbolism, and artistic unity. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” successfully uses a plethora of elements of fiction to create a thought provoking work of literary fiction.

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